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## Harvest of Dissent: Agrarianism in Nineteenth-Century New York

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*Harvest of Dissent: Agrarianism in Nineteenth-Century New York*, by Thomas Summerhill. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005. xi, 287 pp. Illustrations, graphs, notes, index. \$38.00 cloth.

Reviewer Ginette Aley is assistant professor of history at the University of Southern Indiana. She is the author of "A Republic of Farm People: Women, Families, and Market-Minded Agrarianism in Ohio, 1820s-1830s" (forthcoming in *Ohio History*, 2007)

Midwesterners seem keenly attuned to the influence of agrarianism in the historical shaping of their world. This is less apparent in other places, such as the Northeast, where alternative economic trajectories overshadowed agriculture. Yet with *Harvest of Dissent: Agrarianism in Nineteenth-Century New York*, Thomas Summerhill reminds us of the political and economic roles and influence of New York's farm people throughout the nineteenth century, particularly as they confronted a transformative period in their state's history.

Summerhill's study of agrarianism and dissent centers on three central New York counties organized in the 1790s—Delaware, Otsego, and Schoharie—that shared common linkages to a history of agrarian dissent, New York's unique manor land tenure system, and similar patterns of agricultural and rural life. He uses letters, diaries, speeches, and newspapers to trace how nineteenth-century farm people altered their political and ideological positions and strategies to meet the challenges to rural society posed by the nation's expanding capitalist economy. He contends that central New York farm people consistently contested the liberal individualism that fueled those changes, often to the point of radicalism and insurgency. He asserts that evidence of such agrarian radicalism can be found in the Anti-Rent Movement of the 1840s, opposition to the construction of the Albany and Susquehanna Railroad during the 1850s and '60s, and the Grange movement beginning in 1874.

With admirable detail, Summerhill recreates the historical complexities and inequalities inherent in central New York's manor system of landholding and lease arrangements. At its heart was the increasingly tenuous, paternalistic proprietor-tenant relationship that obligated the tenant in a number of ways. For example, the tenant was expected to concede a kind of managerial prerogative regarding agricultural decisions to the proprietor. According to Summerhill, this translated into a veritable tug-of-war by the 1820s, pitting the commercially oriented proprietors against what he characterizes as commercially reluctant tenants (20). Unfortunately, this is a somewhat simplistic economic dichotomy that some scholars use to assert that early to mid-nineteenth-century farm people universally "feared the market" and lacked ambi-

tion. This assumption of an absence of market orientation among farmers is rather loosely grounded, since evidence to the contrary exists.

Political upheaval among producers marked central New York during the Jacksonian era. By 1835, the region's population had increased and thus access to land had decreased such that tenant farmers holding perpetual leases possessed no real leverage in seeking better terms and ways to improve their circumstances, and they became notably frustrated. Moreover, agriculture and those who practiced it were also undergoing change in having to respond to soil exhaustion by switching to mixed dairy farming and to the implications of new market access as a result of the opening of the Erie Canal. The proverbial last straw was the Panic of 1837, which compelled proprietors to aggressively seek repayment of back rents and debts from the already pinched farmers, spawning the Anti-Rent movement of the 1840s.

Summerhill argues that although tenant farmers of central New York had attained title to their lands, their failure to translate the movement into "genuine economic power" (88) meant that they would not be able to control the rapidly developing commercial agriculture system that, beginning in the 1850s, centered on hops production and increasing specialization in dairying. Summerhill cites the subsequent debate over the construction of the Albany and Susquehanna Railroad as evidence that both farmers and the agrarian ideal would hereafter contend with the power of big business politics. At that point they realized that they could not depend on political parties to safeguard their interests. Yet, while central New York farm people became increasingly conservative by century's end, they were not complacent. During the 1870s they flocked to the Grange movement, choosing to work within their own communities for social, economic, and political changes, while sidestepping the more radical, national-level politics of the Populists.

Summerhill's study of nineteenth-century agrarian radicalism is important for its rich, complicated portrayal of local northeastern agrarianism within the context of its own set of social, rural, economic, and political relations. However, his characterizations of farmers as being universally reluctant market capitalists, without ambition or the ability to see the market as an opportunity to improve their families' circumstances, are unconvincing. Indeed, Summerhill occasionally romanticizes and appears to overstate tenant farmers' affinity for the manor system they helped to destroy. Yet this criticism does not take away from the overall merits of this fine book.